

## Developing Researcherhood: Identity Tensions and Identity Work of Women Academics Reflecting on their Researcher Identity

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## Developing *Researcherhood*: Identity Tensions and Identity Work of Women Academics Reflecting on their Researcher Identity

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### Key words:

hermeneutic  
phenomenology;  
socioanalytic  
research; social  
dream drawing;  
researcher  
identity; identity  
theory; work  
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work;  
researcherhood;  
reflexivity

**Abstract:** In this article, I explore the researcher identity of senior women academics in a South African institution of higher education. The aim was to uncover the identity tensions they experience in relation to being a researcher and to understand how they respond to and resolve these tensions. Three focus groups, based on the socioanalytic method of social dream drawing, provided the data. Data were analyzed through hermeneutic phenomenological reflection. Identity theory was applied as a conceptual framework to guide my interpretation of the data. Through their collective reflection on being researchers, the women became cognizant of identity tensions and their engagement with these reflected intrapersonal processing akin to identity work. In the findings, I highlight purposeful, collective identity work as a resource that enabled these women to re-construct self-defeating gendered conflicts in their *researcherhood*. By uncovering their identity tensions and related emotions, a sense of researcher self-efficacy emerged. They consequently reframed research success as meaningful self-expression and knowledge dissemination. I propose that collective identity work is a valuable endeavor for women researchers because it facilitates role identity development and a collective voice in responding to the demanding and constantly changing academic work context.

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, scholars recognize how the changing landscape of higher education gives way to numerous contextual tensions that affect academic identity (BILLOT, 2010a; BOYD & SMITH, 2016; GRANT & ELIZABETH, 2015; VAN LANKVELD, SCHOONENBOOM, VOLMAN, CROISET & BEISHUIZEN, 2017). Increasingly, higher education institutions must operate within a globalized and technologically advanced information economy coupled with funding and quality assurance pressures. As a result, universities have become more corporate, espousing a culture reminiscent of bureaucratic management and neoliberal organization (BILLOT, 2010a; HENKEL, 2012; VAN LANKVELD et al., 2017). Such a culture emphasizes continued productivity and performativity (SUTTON 2015), frequently to the detriment of academic freedom and autonomy (BOYD & SMITH, 2016). Regarding academic identity, the higher education environment has been affected by neoliberal thinking and management to such an extent that the more common reference to an "academic workforce" is being substituted for the revered "academic profession" (BOYD & SMITH, 2016, p.680), which is referred to as "less exceptional" (HENKEL, 2012, p.158). [1]

Academics' identity is furthermore challenged by the multiple roles they have to fulfill. These include teaching, research, leadership, knowledge exchange through academic citizenship and community engagement (BOYD & SMITH, 2016). Academic identity is constructed on these roles, of which teaching and research are the most intrinsic, yet contradictory, work-roles (XERRI, 2017). According to BOYD and SMITH (2016), some academics deal with the tensions between research and teaching by diminishing the researcher identity in favor of that of teacher. Nevertheless, higher education continues to regard research as the main vehicle to institutional prosperity and the primary commodity of academic success (VON SOLMS & VON SOLMS, 2016). [2]

Although fewer studies explore researcher identity than teacher identity in academia, similar contextual factors apply (MERTKAN & BAYRAKLI, 2018). In the context of neoliberal, bureaucratic higher education, the pressure for measurable research output is a contemporary tendency that overshadows traditional reputational norms for academic success. Requirements for research productivity are communicated in the quest for prompter graduation and faster publication (MÄÄTTÄ & UUSIAUTTI, 2015). Fierce competition for research funding is furthermore operationalized through tedious and bureaucratic administrative procedures not traditionally associated with the academic work role (ibid.). As such, research identities are being "colonized" by policy-led research, stringent research audits and measurement, as well as by complex funding regimes (BILLOT, 2010b, p.38). [3]

Against this background, GRANT and ELIZABETH (2015) question academics' failure to oppose the damaging incursion of such neoliberalist performance-reward schemes in their work. These scholars' concern is echoed by SUTTON's (2015, p.42) reflection on his work identity: "I have compromised my academic integrity as a progressive educator by a fatalistic conformity to bureaucratic

directives, by a resigned acceptance of yet more performativity." Another concern raised by GRANT and ELIZABETH (2015) highlights the gendered effect of performatory output-based incentive schemes for research in academia. At present, more women are entering the management and professional hierarchy in higher education. However, despite having equal access to research resources, these females' research achievement remains lower than that of their male counterparts (FRITSCH, 2016; GRANT & ELIZABETH, 2015; OBERS, 2014; ZULU, 2013). Various researchers emphasize this gender gap in higher education irrespective of women's educational and socio-political advancement. The reason is that females continue to experience gender bias in this work context (MARINE & ALEMÁN, 2018). GRANT and ELIZABETH (2015) concur with MORLEY (2007) that contemporary management of research output tends to "reinscribe gender to the detriment of women's success and enjoyment in academic life" (GRANT & ELIZABETH, 2015, p.290). According to MORLEY (2007, p.60), such performativity reflects a discourse that is "reminiscent of the cultural pressures on women in general to strive for perfection." [4]

Much has been written in the South African context about challenges in higher education involving the careers of women in academia (MAYER, OOSTHUIZEN & SURTEE, 2017; MAYER, SURTEE & BARNARD, 2015; OBERS, 2014; RIORDAN & LOUW-POTGIETER, 2011; ZULU, 2013). However, few studies focus on the researcher identity of female academics in this regard. Exploring female academics' researcher identity can provide insight into the identity tensions that frustrate these women in their research endeavors. The aim of this study was therefore to uncover the identity tensions women experience as researchers in a South African higher education context. The focus was furthermore on how they resolve and cope with such identity conflicts and demands. [5]

Identity theory and the constructs of work identity and identity work are first explained in the following section as the guiding meta-theory in this study. Thereafter, the methodology, study context and methods are described. The study's findings are presented and discussed, noting implications for theory, practice and research. [6]

## **2. Identity Theory, Work Identity, and Identity Work**

Identity theory derives from symbolic interactionism (BRENNER, SERPE & STRYKER, 2014) and assumes a socially constructed view of the self (LEEDS-HURWITZ, 2006). Identity denotes the meaning that defines the self and the self includes multiple identities, each constituting expectations of the self that are linked to a social context (STETS & BURKE, 2014a). Identity theory categorizes an individual's multiple identities along three social bases: one's particular roles in society, being a member of specific societal groups, and one's unique personal characteristics (STETS & SERPE, 2013). The multiple identities that constitute the self thus consist of role identities (e.g., a mother, friend, or a work identity), social identities (e.g., a white, female identity) and personal identities (e.g., being conscientious, systematic and diplomatic). In this categorization, work identity,

such as being an academic, or in particular, being a researcher, is regarded as a role identity. In the present study I focused on being a researcher, or the researcher identity, which is regarded as an intrinsically significant work identity or role identity of the academic in higher education (XERRI, 2017).

Understanding any specific role identity inevitably requires a reflection on the self, which is constituted upon an integration of all one's various identity bases. The meaning that defines the self reflects individuals' integrative meaning of their role, social, and personal identities (BURKE & STETS, 2009). Similarly, SAAYMAN and CRAFTORD (2011) note that work identity, in this context of the researcher identity, can best be understood in relation to the self's various identities, which cannot be separated in any particular situation (STETS & SERPE, 2013). When considering a role identity such as researcher identity, it should be in relation to the social and personal identities that together constitute the self. [7]

Multiple identities are organized in the self, according to their relative *salience* and *prominence* and this determines how an identity is enacted in a specific situation (BRENNER et al., 2014). *Identity salience* implies the relative position of an identity within a hierarchical structure of importance and presents the probability of invoking that identity in social interaction (ibid.). The *identity-prominence* approach explains identity enactment in a similar vein, yet highlights the affective and subjective value individuals attach to their various identities (ibid.). The prominence hierarchy thus reflects people's ideal self and emphasizes individual motivation to maintain or revise the self or aspects of the self (SZELENYI, BRESONIS & MARS, 2016). [8]

Incongruence between the meanings and structure of the different identity bases in the self leads to the experience of identity tension or threat (BREAKWELL, 2010). Identity tensions also result from seeking a unique sense of self while simultaneously wanting to belong and be accepted by others. The need to belong manifests itself in the development of social and role identities, yet frequently creates tension with the need for distinctiveness (KREINER, HOLLENSBE & SHEEP, 2006). Social interaction makes one aware of such identity tensions, as the individual receives and evaluates feedback relevant to the self in a social context. In response, a person attempts to resolve or balance identity tensions by revising or maintaining identity meanings and/or structure (BREAKWELL, 2010). Identity is therefore not a stable or fixed phenomenon, but a dynamic process of social construction in which identity meanings and structure in the self are continuously developed, maintained, repaired, and changed (BROWN, 2017; LEEDS-HURWITZ, 2006). This process is referred to as *identity work* (SVENNINGSON & ALVESSON, 2003) and entails processes of identity development or identity construction (GALLIHER, RIVAS-DRAKE & DUBOW, 2017; MCGIVERN, CURRIE, FERLIE, FITZGERALD & WARING, 2015). Identity work can be a conscious or unconscious process, yet in everyday life, it frequently happens naturally and involuntarily (STETS & SERPE, 2013), either to maintain or adjust identity meanings and/or structure in response to experiencing tension between role, social and personal identities. [9]

Various intrapersonal processes are applied in this consistent dynamic of identity work. These include the processes of self-verification (STETS & SERPE, 2013; SZELÉNYI et al., 2016), assimilation and accommodation, as well as evaluation (BREAKWELL, 1988). In the process of identity *verification*, a person applies perceptual control dynamics to ensure correspondence between self-meanings and feedback from others on any specific identity (KALKHOFF, MARCUSSEN & SERPE, 2016; STETS & BURKE, 2014a; STETS & SERPE, 2013). When individuals perceive congruence with regard to meanings, salience and prominence of the multiple identities that constitute the self, they experience positive emotions, since their identity is verified. Distress and negative emotions result from perceived discrepancies (identity non-verification; KALKHOFF et al., 2016). In this way, people consistently monitor self-relevant feedback during social interactions and are motivated to change their identity-related behavior to ensure congruence between the multiple identities that constitute the self (SZELÉNYI et al., 2016). According to the identity model of BREAKWELL (1988, 1993), *assimilation* refers to the psychological process of incorporating new meaning elements into one's identity, whereas *accommodation* means adjusting the existing identity structure to create space for new elements. Through the *evaluation* process, the relative worth (prominence) of each element in one's identity is affectively judged and has a value attached to it (BREAKWELL, 2010). The value of every element is open to revision by the person to enhance self-esteem, and to ensure the continuity and distinctiveness of the self (ibid.). [10]

The changing work environment consistently necessitates adjustment in behavior, and this inevitably brings about the experience of identity tension. In response, identity work ensues as people apply the above-mentioned processes of identity development in order to resolve and balance identity tensions in the personal, social, and role identities (ADAMS & CRAFFORD, 2012; BROWN, 2017; KREINER et al., 2006). [11]

### 3. Methodology

I followed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and applied a socioanalytic methodology in this study. Congruent with a social constructionist epistemology, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach emphasizes the interpretation of lived experience (COHEN & OMERY, 1994; DOWLING, 2007), with the researcher engaging in and from a socially constructed world of meaning (DAVIDSEN, 2013). In hermeneutic phenomenology it is therefore accepted that the researcher's preconceptions frame methodological decisions and facilitate the interpretive process (DAVIDSEN, 2013; LAVERTY, 2003). In this study, identity theory, work identity and identity work constituted the pre-conceived conceptual framework or meta-theoretical lens that guided my interpretation of the data. Socioanalytic methodology also formed part of my conceptual framework to guide the manner in which data were collected. Before providing a rationale for the socioanalytic methodology that was applied, it is important to note that findings from a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry such as this reflect a co-constructed meaning that does not claim to be a universal truth, but opens a new

appreciation and creative understanding of possible meaning (CROTTY, 2005; GALBIN, 2014). [12]

Researcher identity as a socially constructed phenomenon was supported by studying researcher identity in focus group format. In light of KALKHOFF et al (2016) pointing to the need for unique qualitative approaches to researching identity and the psychological nuances in identity work, social dream drawing (SDD) was chosen as the specific focus group format for this study. Social dream drawing was deemed appropriate for exploring researcher identity and related identity work, because it is grounded in socioanalytic methodology. In socioanalytic methodology, social phenomena are explored by accessing the collective or associative unconscious<sup>1</sup>, and meaning is constructed through the conscious processing thereof (MERSKY & SIEVERS, 2019). The associative unconscious can be described as a mental network in which people do not necessarily share identical thoughts, but every person introduces parts of a comprehensive whole (LONG & HARNEY, 2013). [13]

The need for identity work in the organizational context is widely recognized (McGIVERN et al., 2015). Employees, however, often experience identity tensions on an unconscious level (SAAYMAN & CRAFFORD, 2011) and identity work frequently occurs involuntarily (STETS & SERPE, 2013). As a result, more attention to purposefully facilitated identity work is called for. McLEAN and SYED (2015), for example, highlight the need for shedding light on practically applied identity development research. BEECH (2017) also pertinently argues for an action-orientated approach to consciously explore and address work identity issues. Social dream drawing was therefore chosen for this study because it is an action research method that on the one hand offers a reflective space to work with collective unconscious thought and experience (MERSKY & SIEVERS, 2019). On the other hand, during an SDD session, unconscious thought is brought to awareness for conscious reflection and learning (MERSKY, 2015). Social dream drawing is furthermore an exploration of unconscious thought and experience in relation to a specific topic (ibid.), making it valuable to derive insight and understanding with regard to a specific research theme, which in this study was researcher identity. [14]

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1 LONG and HARNEY (2013) refer to the associative unconscious by distinguishing it from Jung's collective unconscious. Various authors in socioanalytic research refer to the collective unconscious, as it is also the more widely recognized term originating from Jungian psychology (HOLLWAY, 2013; MERSKY, 2015). Despite recognizing the importance of the nature of the unconscious in socioanalytic research (HOLLWAY, 2013), arguing different conceptualizations falls beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, not to exclude any potential interest, both the terms "collective" and "associative unconscious" are used here, but the distinctive perspective of systems theory on the associative unconscious is highlighted.

## 4. Study Context

This study was conducted in a South African institution of higher education. The South African higher education landscape is transforming at an alarming rate, given the country's changing socio-political context. Skill and financial shortages in the face of increasing student numbers have led to challenging role and performance expectations with which academics struggle to cope (BEZUIDENHOUT & BEZUIDENHOUT, 2014). South African research performance policies have become increasingly driven by an output-based approach and audit protocol similar to those in New Zealand (BILLOT, 2010b). The Policy and Procedures for Measurement of Research Output of Public Higher Education Institutions was promulgated in 2003. Through this policy, the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) strives to encourage research productivity through a financial incentive scheme (VELDSMAN & GEVERS, 2014). This scheme focuses predominantly on measuring the volume of research outputs (HARLEY, HUYSAMEN, HLUNGWANI & DOUGLAS, 2016; JEENAH & POURIS, 2008). Although some note the DHET's equal emphasis on quantity and quality (VELDSMAN & GEVERS, 2014), its regulatory output-based funding scheme has contradictory implications for quality research (HARLEY et al., 2016). The research context in higher education therefore presents fertile ground for South African academics to experience identity tensions and demands. These tensions are even more pertinent to women academics, as male academics continue to outperform females in terms of research output (FRITSCH, 2016). [15]

## 5. Methods

### 5.1 Procedure and participants

The participants in the study were invited by e-mail to participate in a focus group on the female academic's experience of being a researcher in higher education. Invitations were sent to women researchers known to publish and research in the field of behavioral sciences. Four women responded to the invitation and participated. The women were all employed permanently and were required within their appointed academic roles to do research in the context of an output-based performance management scheme. Three of the women were full-time tenured at the faculty (associate or full professor) and one was a senior lecturer, busy with her doctorate. In terms of research, all the women have published articles in scientific journals, made presentations at international conferences, and supervised several postgraduate students. These female researchers therefore constituted a purposeful sample of information-rich participants (PATTON, 2015) to explore the researcher identity of women in higher education. In hermeneutic phenomenological research small, yet homogeneous, samples of between 1 and 15 are regarded as appropriate to ensure in-depth exploration of personal experience (PIETKIEWICZ & SMITH, 2014). [16]

Following the first focus group, the women collectively agreed to participate in two subsequent focus groups. The rigor and richness of the data were strengthened



through the additional focus groups. The second focus group followed six months after the first session, and the third one nine months after the second one. Each focus group lasted approximately 4.5 hours. Participants consented that the data to be used for research and ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. [17]

## 5.2 Data collection

In socioanalytic data collection methods, the collective or associative unconscious is explored collectively and consciously, to construct in-depth understanding of human phenomena (LONG, 2013; LONG & HARNEY, 2013; MERSKY, 2015). Accordingly, data were collected by structuring the focus groups on the method of SDD developed by MERSKY (2008, 2013). As with the social dreaming matrix, the SDD method uses dream-based images to elicit associative thinking about a social phenomenon (FROGETT, MANLEY & ROY, 2015; MERSKY & SIEVERS, 2019). Associative thinking relates to free association and allows for reflecting on thoughts and ideas that are not readily available to the conscious mind (FROGETT et al., 2015). For an SDD session, participants prepare a drawing of a dream they had. Dreams are not analyzed, but used as impetus to evoke emotional experience, generate thinking and create symbols of meaning among the participants in the group (HOLLWAY, 2013). The drawings, thoughts and symbols of meaning generated in the group are then used during the session as a stimulus for collective thinking and discussion with a particular theme in mind (MERSKY, 2015). The theme of the first session was "Who am I as a researcher?," while the themes for the second and third sessions were both "Dreaming the researcher." During the SDD session each participant had the opportunity to show and explain her dream drawing. Thereafter, participants were directed to use free association and amplification (LONG 2013) in relation to the dream drawing presented (MERSKY, 2008). Finally, the group discussion moved to a conscious, critical reflection on what the participants had learnt about being researchers, generating themes and ideas relating to the SDD theme (ibid). [18]

## 5.3 Data management and analysis

The three sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim after obtaining consent from all the participants. Data were imported into ATLAS.ti and analyzed through hermeneutic phenomenological reflection (VAN MANEN, 1990). This analytic strategy is an unstructured form of thematic analysis (CRESWELL, 2013) appropriate to the approach of abductive reasoning followed in socioanalytic inquiry (MERSKY, 2015). The data from the three SDD sessions were first read chronologically and then re-read as a whole. Thereafter, each SDD was scrutinized for statements, phrases and sentences that provide potential meaning. The search for essential meaning in the data (VAN MANEN, 1990) was guided by my conceptual pre-understanding of identity theory, work identity and identity work. The focus was first on uncovering the identity tensions that female researchers experience. Second, I intended to understand how they cope with these tensions, by locating processes of identity work and revisions in meaning related to the researcher identity. Themes were abductively constructed, to

provide new ways of understanding and propositions of which the probability is not yet known (LONG, 2013; LONG & HARNEY, 2013). [19]

## 6. Findings

I approached the data with attentiveness to identity tensions in and between identity bases, as well as to how the women researchers engaged with and responded to these. This led to constructing three dynamic themes that describe researcher identity tensions and the identity work that resulted from collective reflection on being a researcher. The three themes are: 1. a constructive re-evaluation of a gendered researcher identity; 2. conscientization of contradictory emotions inspiring a sense of researcher self-efficacy; and 3. reframing research success as meaningful self-expression and knowledge generation. The identity work described reflects how the women collectively engaged with their researcher identity to develop self-congruent *researcherhood*. In the findings, I use *researcherhood* as a neologism synonymous to researcher identity. Apart from *researcherhood* denoting the state of being a researcher, it signifies for me a synthesis of the need for distinctiveness and the need for social belonging that typically underlies identity work. The word derives from *sisterhood*, which means the state of being a sister or of being part of a community of sisters.<sup>2</sup> *Researcherhood* emphasizes the solidarity of the women based on shared experiences and meaning in relation to their researcher identity, without disregard for their distinctiveness as individual researchers. Next, I discuss the three themes. [20]

### 6.1 A constructive re-evaluation of a gendered researcher identity

The participants voiced internal conflict due to stereotypical expectations of male and female success. Such gendered preconceptions stem from their social identity, which subconsciously presents them with a gendered benchmark against which to assess elements of identity in the self, such as their personal identity and researcher identity. Through the process of identity *evaluation*, women for instance positively value characteristics of the self, such as being nurturing and caring, but regard these as being female: "nurturing has to do with all of this, because, I mean, not that I think it's not a role of a male person, but females are our main role, especially with our children and with our siblings" (SDD1). In terms of being a researcher, women characterize themselves as being in the background, and success is ascribed to men:

"Often you would hear this person is the father of this, or that person is the father of that, but hardly ever do you hear but this person is the mother of. The mother is always this thing below the surface, behind the scenes, behind the curtain, at the back of the play" (SDD1). [21]

This presents evidence of identity tension, since female characteristics that are highly valued in the self are perceived as incompatible with characteristics

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2 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sisterhood> [Accessed: June 25, 2019].

typically ascribed to research performance, such as excellence, competition, and achievement. In free-associating to one of the dream drawings, participants compared women doing research to running like Caster SEMENYA.<sup>3</sup> Based on this association, participants framed research competence in terms of male characteristics and expressed fear that they had to give up being regarded as a woman if they excelled: "I agree with you, this thing of that if as a woman you excel, then you will be seen as a man" (SDD3). The participants contemplated whether as women they could permit themselves to embrace and enjoy their excellence, for fear of being ostracized as females striving to be like males. As a result, women struggle with their need to retain their social identity while also remaining authentic in their need to be respected as successful researchers. [22]

The extent of the participants' identity tension was further evident in the way they ironically criticized themselves as being arrogant when recognizing or celebrating aspects of excellence in themselves. When they reflect on themselves as being clever or competent, they judge themselves as grandiose, narcissistic, or masking maleness. Because of such identity tensions, women researchers tend to downplay their own competence. For example, one participant's negative evaluation of being referred to as "clever" caused her to downplay her competence, thus avoiding being scrutinized as superior or self-centered. In the following discussion, she identified how equating her competence with "grandiosity" is linked to a certain gendered evaluation of women's competence as incompatible with apparently favored female characteristics, such as being selfless and humane:

"It was for me really something to go and think about because how I collude with my own development is the moment somebody says that [being clever] to me, I do the work to become small. The question that this raises for me is: Can we as women dare to embrace our excellence? Can grandiosity be a positive thing; can we dare to embrace it?" (SDD1) [23]

The identity tension clearly shows a conflict between the need for social belonging (fostered by the social identity) and the need for distinctiveness as a researcher (elicited by role identity). Women are socially programmed to believe they should display characteristics that are not necessarily aligned with excellence as a researcher. Therefore, according to the process of *self-verification* (STETS & SERPE, 2013), women unconsciously act to ensure the impression they create is congruent with stereotypical femaleness. However, the identity tension escalates when these females' need for achievement and self-actualization as researchers is realized from a dream drawing depicting a racetrack and associations with competition and achievement. Reflecting on their researcher identity, participants progressively expressed an innate desire for recognition and excellence and became aware that they were not averse to competition. Moreover, they seemed to seek achievement and recognition for

3 Caster SEMENYA, a South African middle-distance runner, won gold in the World Championships in 2009 and 2017 as well as at the 2012 and 2016 Olympics. She has been in the press not only because of her exceptional athletic achievements, but also due to controversial allegations about her testosterone levels and sex development (BLOOM, 2018; LONGMAN, 2009).

being excellent. This desire is, on the one hand, accompanied by a sense of insecurity, since it conflicts with their gendered social identity that defines research success in terms of male performativity. On the other hand, the women voiced their desire to achieve without losing their uniqueness:

"Surely you want to live out your uniqueness, and your uniqueness is not at the bottom of those gradings. It is also not in the average part, but in the top part. I think that my fear as a researcher is that sometimes I am at the bottom and sometimes, I think I am average" (SDD2). [24]

During the SDD sessions, the participants continued with identity work to resolve the tension. Through the process of *assimilation*, the women gradually began showing evidence that they were reconsidering the gendered nature of research performance, and assimilated elements such as achievement and excellence into their role identity. This assimilation clearly emerged when the participants began acknowledging that characteristics traditionally regarded as male may not necessarily be male or female: "I find myself moving towards increasingly wanting to idealize the feminine—something I should guard against. I think I must be honest that the competition and the aggression is in me as a woman" (SDD2). After showing awareness of the gendered identity tensions, women seemingly begin utilizing *accommodation* strategies to adjust the content of their social identity. In this regard, participants progressively celebrated all their characteristics—ungendered: "So, maybe it is about male and female, you know. Maybe it is not just about male" (SDD2). Research at this point was described as an opportunity "to appropriate through contradictory beings" (SDD2). The participants worked towards integrating gendered splits and a researcher identity that is not construed on a particular gender:

"I think what AB makes me think about is Eros and Thanatos and how they live at exactly the same place ... If I'm a researcher then I should be able to work with Eros and Thanatos. ... the fact that in relation to the dream the gender of the person being dragged in could not be identified is significant" (SDD3). [25]

By doing identity work in relation to being a researcher, participants became aware of the gendered tensions underlying their social and role identities. They then progressively re-constructed the inhibiting gendered researcher identity by unsubscribing research performance from maleness, attributing it rather to integrating both female and male in their researcherhood. [26]

## **6.2 Researcher self-efficacy emerges from conscientization of contradictory emotions**

The participants uncovered strong contradictory emotions when reflecting on being a researcher. Emotions linked to being a researcher varied from feeling inspired and excited, to fear, uncertainty, anger and even resentment. Being a researcher at times was compared to "a whirlwind totally out of control" and at other times "it's really pleasurable" and "actually a creative process" (SDD2). Intense contradictory emotions also surfaced, as these women were feeling torn,

both pushed and pulled at the same time: "There is all this pulling and pushing ... your one arm is being pulled this side and the other one is being pulled that side. You don't know which side you need to go to" (SDD1). These emotions were mentioned in response to a drawing of a person being unwillingly pushed forward by some unseen force. [27]

Their expressed contradictory emotions were evident of the identity tension women feel as a result of inconsistent role demands regarding research. In higher education there is a demand for research output, yet a promise of academic freedom. In this sense, the women described the institution as the sustaining force of a conflicted researcher identity. Participants pointed out in SDD2 that the research context, "is supposed to be such a tranquil space, rich space, but yet in this drawing it represents chaos in some way." In free association to a dream drawing showing a room with a threatening monster in one corner and a person surrounded by gifts in the other, the participants described the institutional context as a "Monster university ... filled with what promises to be quite nice, but it's quite monstrous and dangerous" (SDD3). [28]

The participants ascribed the danger to them in the system as being incapacitated by the demand for research output, which conflicts with their perspective of research achievement. In free association to the drawing, the participants described themselves as captured by performance demands: "So it's almost like being trapped in there and having to do something there ... you are caught in this, ja, you are caught in the system ... you are stuck in doing what needs to be done" (SDD3). In light of the "monster" representing a demand for more publications, the women expressed feeling empty and used by means of a powerful female metaphor:

"Actually, because this breast looks shriveled and, you know, really used and there is some richness in the breast to give, but it is with a little bit of suffering you know. Having given to an extent that you feel a little bit used and you know, you don't feel that you are getting anywhere ... the breast is almost damaged, it's almost damaged in that it's lost its beautiful form" (SDD3). [29]

By uncovering and processing their emotions in relation to being researchers, the participants entered into what GIAMPAPA (2016, p.320) terms "conscientization," a psychological process of developing critical awareness through reflection and action. This conscious raising of their emotions gave rise to voicing collectively the contradictory demands inherent to research output in higher education. It developed into a discussion of their internal strengths and resources or "psychological armor," referring to themselves as "gladiators" (SDD3). A dream drawing that depicts an airplane elicited free associations of being an insect and flying like an insect, but piloting one's own flight:

"What I really like about the dream is how ... the plane or the insect really gets near to danger. And that thing of almost crash and burn. Do I have enough psychological armor to deal with it, if there is a crash or a fall-out? But then, if I think about driving or piloting or being in the plane, the thought that was coming up for me as a

researcher, where am I likely to discover my strength. When I'm choosing to ride in an airplane if somebody else is piloting or when I get out of the plane and fly by myself" (SDD2). [30]

An amplification of Nelson MANDELA's favorite poem, [Invictus](#) by William HENLEY, was offered and a sense of self-efficacy for the women researchers became evident: "You know what comes to mind to me is that a poem by, I've got it on my wall in my office. That Nelson Mandela used to refer to, the power within, what you are most scared of is not that you are small, but that you are" (SDD2). [31]

Researchers' identity work deals with the contradictions in their work identity due to functioning in a system with ambiguous and ambivalent role demands. Through their collective reflection on being researchers in these SDD sessions, the participants began taking ownership to authorize themselves to be competent and worthy researchers in this context: "I think something that stands out to me is the self-authorization that has to happen" (SDD2). In emphasizing their ability to pilot their own academic careers, however small, a sense of researcher self-efficacy emerged, expressing a belief in their ability as researchers: "And that you shouldn't be scared of the greatness that you can bring" (SDD2). With this, the potential for a different way of thinking about what constitutes research success evolved, which I discuss in the next theme. [32]

### **6.3 Reframing research success as meaningful self-expression and knowledge generation**

Positive identification with their researcherhood is evident from the participants' experience of research as a personally significant and important activity. Yet, in all the SDD sessions, consistent and prominent tension was apparent between the personal and the researcher identity. The tension was particularly evident where participants reflected on what it means to be a successful researcher. The women expressed discontent with their research performance and downplayed their research competence. In reflecting on being a researcher, the participants related to a dream drawing of a river flowing through a landscape, depicting a house, the sun, trees and rocks. In comparing this drawing to the research landscape, the women saw themselves as inherently part of it, yet, as researchers, they also saw themselves as not being noticeable:

"I would like to say I'm in the flow of it all, just the movement of it all. Not to stand out of it all, but to almost be one with it, to be in that movement, to be in the sun, to be in the rocks, to be in the water, but not, ja, not to stand out as a figure" (SDD1). [33]

The tension between the personal and the researcher identity is highlighted by the sense of losing oneself in a race for output:

"There is so much to do, to think of, and you don't know where to start and what would be the right way and you are struggling to order and just get a sensible point to start from. Then isolating yourself and just going away from all of the noise, trying to

first find yourself being rooted again; earthed again to find yourself and then to do the work" (SDD1). [34]

The issue of research performance was further evident in a dream about a banquet of sweets and deserts, which was compared to chasing research output requirements, and left the women feeling empty and inadequate: "When I was busy going around gathering, it was nice. It was lots of activity I'm collecting but afterwards I was left feeling quite empty" (SDD3). An amplification of this dream draws attention to Hansel and Gretel being enticed by the witch's candied cottage, and their struggle to escape from it. Participants reflected on being a researcher as caught in an institutional system that captures one with the "deliciousness" of abundance (SDD3). In their processing, the participants emphasized the performativity context of research in higher education and felt incapacitated to deliver outputs even amid abundant opportunities: "As a researcher the notion of collecting and never quite using, this one is for me lots of data and draft papers that I'm sitting with. And I seem to never find the time to translate them into outputs" (SDD3). While taking on and utilizing abundant research opportunities for women in higher education, the participants emphasized the ever-growing expectation of more research output. [35]

At face value, more research opportunities, specifically for women, seem well intended. Yet, women's struggle to produce research output is amplified by the unspoken conditional message in the narrative of opportunity. Such a message carries strong performativity expectations, where failure to produce output could be regarded as being ungrateful and/or incompetent. This message may cause negative self-evaluation and elicit negative emotions. Feelings include guilt about having privileged access to resources, but not using these more effectively; dissatisfaction with the self; and frustration with the inability to break out of the preoccupation with ineffective busyness. [36]

By uncovering these emotions and voicing the shared experience, the participants could voice the value of doing meaningful research instead of merely focusing on research productivity as a quantified goal. In the personal versus role identity tension, the prominence of personal identity seemed to aid the participants to resolve the tension. Valuing the self is emphasized in SDD1: "The message then is to be true to yourself. Because if that energizes you where you function well, then being true to yourself and do that is important." [37]

Through identity work it seems that *accommodation* (BREAKWELL, 1988, 1993) adjusts content elements of the researcher identity to emphasize meaningful research as an important goal: "There is so much busyness and things that look sexy and interesting, which one can easily get caught up in ... and yet in another day it stops one from doing things that are meaningful" (SDD3). The participants started to reframe their research ambition in terms of expressing meaning and making meaningful contributions through research. Moving from a position where they question their ability to perform, participants emphasized the meaningfulness of their output: "If we act on it, is it going to be meaningful in terms of what we want to put in a journal somewhere or on a shelf somewhere?" (SDD3). In this

way, they resolve the tension between personal and role identity by reframing the notion of research success. Instead, they redefine research as a valuable pursuit if it allows for meaningful self-expression that reverberates into the dissemination of knowledge that is also meaningful to others. [38]

## 7. Discussion

The findings reflect women researchers' identity work as a response to various identity tensions they experience in an academic work setting. Identity tensions were evident between specific identity bases, namely first, between their social and researcher identity (i.e. role identity), second, within their work identity, and third, between their personal identity and researcher identity. Reflecting on researcher identity in the SDD sessions uncovered these tensions and led to collective intrapersonal processing that resembles identity work. Identity work was apparent in the processes of self-verification, evaluation, and assimilation-accommodation aimed at maintaining distinctiveness as a researcher, yet balanced with their need for belonging to a researcherhood. The identity work in response to the noted identity tensions reflected constructive re-evaluation (BRYGOLA, 2011) of three distinct researcher identity content elements, which can be framed as the ungendered, efficacious, and meaningful selves. [39]

In the first theme, tension between social and role identity was resolved by constructing an ungendered researcherhood. The tensions mentioned are the result of engrained gendered role expectations, which cause perceived incompatibility between female characteristics and the "male" characteristics required for being a successful researcher. In this regard, women's social identity poses an unconscious threat to their self-confidence as researchers. The participants uncovered the origin of their insecurity and self-doubt in an introjected gendered social identity. They engaged in a process of conscious self-reflection, which led them to re-construct the gendered researcher identity in a manner that was somewhat less encumbered by stereotypical gender role demands. This opened the possibility to embrace their researcherhood by identifying with and valuing both their female and male characteristics as intrinsically important in being researchers. [40]

In the second theme, tension within the work identity was resolved by constructing a self-efficacious researcherhood. The participants acknowledged their struggle to cope with the performativity demands of being a researcher and reflected on how this affected their research self-efficacy. As highly functioning individuals, they felt confused by their inability to perform as expected. However, through identity work they were able to feel and voice their confusing and often contradictory emotions. This helped them uncover the identity tensions underlying their work identity, which they were experiencing in a contradictory institutional work context. On the one hand, being a researcher provided these women with stimulating research opportunities; on the other hand, they felt used and unsupported by the institution, to the extent that they felt empty and unable to perform. In this regard, doing identity work stimulated in them a conscious reflection or "conscientization" of the emotional turbulence they experienced in



the higher education work context. The raised consciousness then facilitated self-authorization in which females acknowledged their choice to do research and pilot their own careers. [41]

In the third theme, tension between personal and role identity was resolved by constructing meaningful researcherhood. The participants idealized being a researcher in the context of an institution that rewards research output and drives such performance by providing numerous development opportunities. Ironically, however, such support overwhelms the women researchers, not only by the increase in workload, but especially owing to the unrealistic unconscious expectations of performativity and the underlying guilt narrative mentioned. Abundant developmental opportunities perpetuate the institution's expectation that women should increase their research output. In reality, these opportunities increase the pressure to perform, and make the women feel guilty and anxious about not complying. This guilt narrative has a debilitating cognitive and emotional effect on women's self-esteem, leading to a form of inertia. The participants resolved this tension between the personal and role identity through assimilation of meaningfulness into their researcher identity. As such, these women re-defined research success as meaningful research, rejecting the notion of quantity as the predominant indication of researcher competence. This process is driven by the female researchers' need to balance self-worth in relation to social value (BREAKWELL, 1993). Ultimately the women reframed their researcherhood as a vehicle for meaningful self-expression and knowledge dissemination, demonstrating a different perspective to what constitutes research success. [42]

Identity work that ensued during the SDD sessions demonstrated how tensions in the different identity bases may negatively affect women researchers' self-efficacy, which may inhibit their enactment and enjoyment of research. The findings underscore the value of collective and purposeful reflection on a context-specific work or role identity. This results in intrapersonal processing parallel to identity work through which identity tensions are collectively uncovered and constructively processed. [43]

## 8. Implications

The field of identity scholarship is vast and continues expanding in empirical studies on identity processes and content in various environments (GALLIHER et al., 2017). The context of higher education is no exception and its changing nature has sparked renewed interest in implications for academic identity (VAN LANKVELD et al., 2017). Especially research on female identity remains a growing concern in the context of academic corporatization (MARINE & ALEMÁN, 2018). A unique contribution to the body of research on women in higher education and the interest in academics' work identity is presented through this study, by highlighting women's identity work in relation to their researcher identity. Therefore, the study is of value in various ways, as explained below. [44]

Firstly, the meta-theoretical contribution is to the field of identity theory by describing a case example of identity work. The numerous studies on individual-level processes of identity work mostly consider conceptualizations of identity, with scant insight into what actually constitutes identity work (BROWN, 2017). In the present study identity theory was applied as an interpretive lens or analytic tool (ibid.). The aim was to describe the identity tensions and identity work that are observed when a collective reflection on a work or role identity (in this instance the researcher identity), is purposefully facilitated. Through this approach the tensions evident in various identity bases of the women participants were revealed. In the findings the psychological nuances and dynamics that obstruct women from enacting their researcher identity were explained. Processes of identity development were described, reflecting these women's identity work in response to identity tensions and to develop a self-congruent researcher identity or *researcherhood*. [45]

Secondly, the pragmatic value of the present study lies in demonstrating how purposeful and collective identity work can lead to engagement with a specific work identity. Through identity work, the women in this study gained insight into the identity tensions that may impede their research functioning. Reflecting on who they are as researchers not only allowed these women to consider the challenges in the work context; it also helped them reflect on the dynamic interrelatedness between the self and the work context. Such reflection deepened their self-awareness and helped these women acknowledge their agency in developing researcher identities that may not comply with traditional gendered success norms. In this regard, identity work helped to evolve the women academics' identities in a way that could enhance their self-efficacy as researchers. [46]

Finally, the methodological value of this study is evident in its application of SDD as a developmental intervention as well as research method. SDD is a unique intervention to potentially engage people in identity work by drawing on the collective processing of conscious and unconscious experience. Through SDD, a safe thinking space (NOSSAL, 2010) is provided that unlocks emotional experiences for creative and conscious cognitive reflection (MERSKY, 2012, 2015). The cognitive space becomes a transformational one (NOSSAL, 2010), which brings about fundamental changes in individual and collective understanding. In the present study, identity work resulted because of the reflective and collective thinking opportunity that was made available during the SDD sessions. Such processing made the researcher identity more prominent in the women's general work identity, by dealing with issues that might hamper them in doing research. It also stimulated creative and collective thinking in reconstructing researcher identity content. As a research method, SDD allows for in-depth exploration of experiences that reflect a range of emotional and cognitive expressions and processing. According to MERSKY (2012, p.37), SDD makes the "unthought known" by bringing unconscious thought processes to light. Knowledge is thus generated collectively and through the systematic and conscious processing of subjective experience (MERSKY, 2015). [47]

## 9. Conclusion

Because of contradictions in contemporary higher education (BOYD & SMITH, 2016), academia faces numerous challenges centered on sustaining well-being, upholding self-efficacy, and achieving universal goals of happiness and success (MÄÄTTÄ & UUSIAUTTI, 2015). In this context, academic identities have become less stable because there is an increased risk of losing self-worth and succumbing to disengagement (HENKEL 2012) or demonstrating "pure self-interest" (MÄÄTTÄ & UUSIAUTTI, 2015, p.29). On the other hand, more career opportunities have emerged with the prospect of reshaping academics' professional identity (HENKEL, 2012). BILLOT and KING (2015) point out that *new* academic identities are unnecessary when responding to the tensions underlying the transformed work context of higher education. For these scholars, the focus should rather be on identity work that enables academics to *reshape* their work identities, in response to changes in their work context. Interventions that facilitate purposeful identity work (JORGENSEN & DUNCAN, 2015) are therefore extremely valuable for higher education. The reason is that developing a researcher identity may make these individuals more engaged in their task, thus enhancing their well-being. [48]

Work identity facilitates the enactment of the work role and is the basis for engagement in this role (ADAMS & CRAFFORD, 2012; STETS & SERPE, 2013). Academics who identify with a researcher identity can thus theoretically be expected to be emotionally more attached to its purpose (VAN LANKVELD et al., 2017) and thus more dedicated to follow its pursuits (BRENNER et al., 2014). Identity work has also been linked to self-esteem and self-efficacy (BREAKWELL, 2010; STETS & BURKE, 2014b). This I observed, when women academics' identity work was purposefully linked to their researcher identity in this study. [49]

Considering the discussion above, management buy-in and institution-wide accountability for efforts to facilitate identity work are highly recommended. Identity work can be a powerful means to effect change on an individual and organizational level (BROWN, 2017; CREED, DeJORDY & LOK, 2010). In the higher education context, purposeful engagement in identity work may help women researchers resolve contradictory role demands and underlying institutional tensions. If they deal with such challenges collectively, these women may become change agents reshaping the role and organizational conditions regarding research and research output that inhibit their optimal functioning (CREED et al., 2010). [50]

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